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ABSTRACT

The dichotomy between the "critical" schools of thought and research practice and the more dominant "empirical" school in the field of communication creates a ferment similar to that described by G. Gerbner in 1983 concerning academic problems in mass communication because of different research perspectives. When addressing the question of whether the differences between these two perspectives are legitimately drawn, drawbacks of both schools become apparent. Both sides tend to deal insufficiently with the specific structural relations of the relevant institutions involved in a particular research problem. Both critical researchers, who ignore empirical information, and noncritical researchers, who settle for what they can get instead of determining the best way to get the desired answers, misperceive the true nature of good research--it need not be empirical or avoid criticism. Both schools can potentially make contributions to the body of research on the effects of the media and the limits of these effects. This polarization represents an opportunity for the field in that critical research redefines old research questions and opens up new areas of inquiry, while noncritical research accepts the critique of the source-receiver model and takes more interest in participatory communication. This polarization is also a challenge because both approaches have their disadvantages and the two schools have not agreed to disagree. Epistemology polarizes the two sides as they disagree about what constitutes an adequate account of social and political phenomena. Although the two sides need not reconcile their beliefs about the structure and function of mass communication, ontological reconciliation as to how they have come to know what they know might be possible.(SRT)

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Ferment in the Field Revisited:

Its Basis and Future

Che-wei Zoe Tan

The term "ferment" was used by George Gerbner in 1983 to describe the events in the field of Communication. Although many of the problems found in the studies of mass media can also be found in the studies of interpersonal communication, this link was not drawn in the volume. In addition, since we may find problems in the area of mass communication which are *not* shared by the area of interpersonal communication, we need to be careful in describing what area it is we are talking about. Gerbner's "ferment" is used to identify academic problems in "mass communication" rather than "communication" in general.

There are two ways to look at this so-called "ferment" in the field of mass communication. One can view it as a process in which fermentation precedes maturation (cf. Schramm and de Sola Pool). Or, one may see it as a state of turbulence that may not necessarily have a peaceful solution (cf. Melody, et al., Lang and Lang). While expectations about this phenomenon are different among scholars, they generally agree on the basis for this ferment which is defined in terms of *differences in research perspectives*. In this paper, the discussion of the basis for this ferment will focus on (1) how the differences are defined, (2) whether these distinctions are legitimately drawn, and (3) whether reconciliations are possible or necessary.

Basis of ferment defined in terms of differences in research approaches

Aside from disagreement among scholars about the usefulness of the approaches, how each of the approaches differs from each other, and what assumptions each of them holds, scholars are having trouble coming to an agreement on *what* approaches are available. For example, William Melody and Robin Mansell distinguish critical and administrative research; Dallas Smythe, Kurt Lang and Gladys Lang distinguish empiricist and criticist approaches; Karl Rosengren contrast empiricist and Marxist views; Timothy Haight contrasts critical researchers as opposed to critical research; Vincent Mosco compare critical and positivistic schools; Ithiel de Sola Pool even refute the very existence of ferment in the field; and finally, Jennifer Slack and Allor were against dichotomizing the approaches into empirical vs. critical, administrative vs. critical, or repressive science vs. emancipatory science. Despite this chaos, we need to address the issue of what these different perspectives are geared toward so that we can know if we have legitimate evidence for claiming ferment, be it constructive or destructive.

The dichotomy between "critical" schools of thought and research practice and the more dominant "empirical" school signifies a miscommunication in the field of communication. Yet this "superficial and illusory" distinction overshadows a more fundamental level of conflict: ties or alignment of theory and research with economic and political factors. For example, Tunstall described empirical or administrative researchers as ignoring the structure of economic and political institutions, the centralization of power, the characteristics of dominant-dependent relations and the incentives of vested interests. Critical researchers, on the other hand, focus research efforts on changes in asymmetrical political and economic relations, and abhor the way the other school relies on (bad) quantitative techniques to generate an atheoretical, unsynthesizable body of results.

This line of logic is comparable to Melody and Mansell's explanation of the ferment

situation. They suggested that the fundamental distinctions between the two schools lie in the pragmatic selection of relevant real-world problems and the subsequent use of research techniques to conduct analysis. The real basis for the dichotomy, they thought, lies in the allegiance of researchers to the status quo (administrative) versus attention to changes in existing political and economic institutionalized power relations (critical). Dallas Smythe added, furthermore, the idea that the ideological perspective, as identified by the researchers' treatment of the results of the analysis, also distinguishes the two schools. In explaining why Gerbner's Cultural Indicators project was an administrative attempt, Smythe seems to focus predominantly upon the study's lack of ideological perspective and emphasis on dialectical materialism.

Based on a more holistic point of view, Jennifer Slack and M. Allor drew a simple yet dynamic picture. They thought it inappropriate to talk about fields of study in terms of dichotomy, because critical mass communication research is not a single entity. Rather, there are, and there should be, a range of alternative approaches to the study of communication. Slack and Allor also pointed out the mistake in naming critical communication research after the Frankfurt school. They emphasized that critical approaches are not limited to or simply developed out of this school's appropriation of the term. Rogers' "seemingly" comprehensive comparison of the empirical and critical schools was criticized as severely missing the point. They thought that the diversity within critical approaches derives from the following factors:

(1) The different ways in which these approaches fracture the linear causal model—It is the interrelations between the levels of politics, economics, and culture that determine particular phenomena. So the "causal determinant" is itself determined by the character of the interrelationship, and is not the sum of its individual elements.

(2) The central concern about the effectivity of communication is the exercise of social power—Different critical approaches focus on different moments of this process. Therefore, epistemology is of crucial significance in determining which moments of this process is to be focused on.

Although all these different ways of conceptualizing the status quo of communication research are "necessary" for considering a field "in ferment", an important question we

need to address is whether these differences are legitimately drawn. Also, if ferment means different thoughts coming into conflict rather than harmony, we need to examine the usefulness of each of these two approaches to see if this ferment represents an *opportunity* for the field of communication or *challenge* to it.

Are the differences between perspectives legitimately drawn?

The answer to this question has to be both "yes" and "no", depending on the level of generality at which we are addressing the issue. At the low level of generality, we see critical research reacting against existing structures by exposing the limitations and abuses of the administrative approach with its failure to consider crucial issues of institutional structure and power relations. Although Slack and Allor recognized a range of approaches, they still made a conceptual dichotomy which suggests that the existing power structure "can do no right" as criticists contended and it "can do no wrong" as administrative researchers contended. These distinctions, drawn between two polar perspectives, seem to warrant the division of intellectual labor.

When we move the level of generality a bit higher, however, we start to lose ground in trying to maintain these differences to a reasonable degree, for the following two reasons:

1)Drawbacks in what both schools try to achieve—

On both sides there is a tendency to deal insufficiently with the specific structural relations of the relevant institutions involved in a particular research problem. Neither side has settled the issue of the extent to which the "real" interests and objectives of the various institutions are likely to facilitate or to hinder the achievement of the research objective. Much noncritical research *assumes these issues away*. And much critical study

only points out that existing institutional structures *are the sources of the problems* and that *they have to be changed.* Criticists make the following observations about the three most frequently addressed issues: media effects studies have to be linked up with the examination of social class and political/economic power; the mythology of "pluralist policy making" ignores "distribution" question; and more technology does not mean more development. However, suggestions are never made clear in critical studies as to *what needs be done, what could be done,* or *what would be realistically done* so that human beings in the world can lead more civilized lives. This mode of research demonstrates enough idealism, yet not enough practicality.

In addition, many critical researchers ignore the relevant *empirical information* with an absolute commitment to *change* which is not at all defined. Not careful about social science measurement issues, they often fall victim to the ecological fallacy because they are usually not clear as to whether they are making macro-level claims based on micro-level data or making micro-level claims based on macro-level data. To take one example, Herbert Schiller (1984) assembled statistics on American multi-national corporations' investment in foreign advertising agencies, and later used these statistics to demonstrate the sweeping effect of American culture on the audience of the receiving nations.

Noncritical researchers, on the other hand, have been settling for what they can get instead of determining the best way to get the answers they are looking for. More specifically, many researchers in this category adopt a view of, as Vincent Mosco puts it, "what is real is measurable, and what is measurable is real."

Most noncritical researchers do not aim at changing the status quo, yet base their work on the empirical evidence, enshrine it, and sometimes make measurable data the definite goal of research. On the other hand, critical researchers are guided by an explicit value, to free people for self-determination, and many tenaciously avoid empiricism, thinking of empiricism as counterproductive to what they wish to achieve. Thus, both noncritical and critical researchers misperceive the true nature of good research—which is

research does not have to be empirical and yet that does not have to avoid true empiricism.

(2) Contributions both schools can potentially make—

Critical communication research is more often found in the international than national areas. Many research problems have dealt with the institutional aspects of developed countries as they collide with the real needs and situations of peoples in developing or underdeveloped countries. Dealing with these problems, critical research has contributed to the demolition of the Rostow's "stage of development" theory, the Lerner-Schramm-Pool "revolution of rising expectations" theory of cultural development, and the legitimacy of the "free flow of information" theory. Future critical work needs to address national issues in a more concrete manner. It could analyze, for example, mass reaction toward new technologies, study the means of resisting them, if they are indeed found to be detrimental to society as a whole or to any specific aspects of society. Critical work could also examine how the democratization of communication institutions and practices may be made possible and how such democratization could serve the interest of peace.

Noncritical research, on the other hand, seems to have had its major research leitmotif in functionalism. Functionalism has been criticized for its weakness in the construction of theory because of its teleological nature. The very teleological nature of functionalism could be used, however, for its heuristic capabilities, and indeed, has been so used. The assumptions of funcrtionalism include the idea that (1) the social system is the prior causal reality, and (2) all components are best conceived as functionally interrelated (Martindale, 1965). Used by noncritical researchers, information is collected on the audience's size, behavior, acceptance and response to specific messages, with attention paid to some content or some type of content, source, or medium. When analyzed from a scholarly perspective, functionalism can and does contribute to our understanding of *how communication works*. This understanding helps describe the patterns of media production and consumption in contemporary society. When such studies deal with newly emerged

media, they lead to particularly valuable insights.

A well-substantiated body of research on the effects of the media and the limits of these effects is no less crucial and valuable as an agent of social development than the criticism of ongoing modes of production, emphasized by the critical school. Such a body of research is not only informative for policy-making, but also, realistically speaking, available as a tool by any group, including criticists, against the status quo.

Do the ranges of the schools, polarized by the critical and noncritical, represent an opportunity or a challenge for the field?

The answer will have to be "both". The polarization represents an *opportunity* for the field because critical research redefines old research questions and opens up new areas of inquiry, and noncritical research accepts the critique of the source-receiver model and takes more interest in participatory communication. This emphasis on participatory communication leads noncritical research to demand for public access to media channels, to insist on balancing the libertarian rights of the media with the public's right to know, to emphasize the spread of education for critical use of the media, and to recognize the value of popular culture. The fact that the two schools assume different epistemologies in communication institutions, processes and research particularly nourishes an opportunity for us to appreciate the dynamics of the roles media play.

Polarization represents a *challenge* as well, because (1) both approaches have disadvantages, and (2) more importantly, *there is no agreement to disagree* among those who respectively belong to the two polarized groups. Each group has refused to see merit in the other. Having conflicting research perspectives and findings is *not* abnormal; conflict is the way the social sciences usually move. What is abnormal is the stance of the so-called "liberal-pluralists" who do not follow the logic that one can label oneself liberal-

pluralist only if one is tolerant of different viewpoints. Unlike the Frankfurt school, the Marxist or neo-Marxists who believe in dialecticism, our critical researchers are intolerant of the noncritical people.

Although all research needs a continuing critique, no school of thought can expect to achieve much by being essentially reactive (the critical school) or inflexible (the noncritical school). If the critical school is only reactive, it will become intellectually dependent upon the dominant school and forever relegated to an inferior academic position. If noncritical school never attempts to correct its "what is measurable is real" attitude, the field will always be fragmented and carry with it a reputation for low-quality research.

All disciplines have their agonies of definitions, approaches, interpretations, contextual considerations and, above all, integrity. The problem with mass communication research is that it has many more of these difficulties, and it has much less communication between researchers themselves. Under these circumstances, what can we expect? Will the disputes between two major battlefields be reconciled?

We do not believe that these disputes are fully or easily reconciliable. At the outset, one might call for a reconciliation between the noncriticist's bias against historical perspective and criticist's bias against the use of empirical data. Yet since this difference is not what truely separates these two polarized approaches; we have to take the issue one step further.

What truly separates these two polarized approaches is epistemology. Epistemology is not merely a simple question of choice of methods or operationalization. To critical researchers, the communication process is not defined in terms of *the effects of messages on individuals*, as administrative researchers normally assume. The communication process is, rather, defined by by critical researchers in terms of the *effectivity (or social role) of communication* (both institutional and cultural) in maintaining, enhancing, or disrupting the existing interrelationships of politics, economics, and culture. This difference makes the criticist and noncriticist what they are. And, this difference makes them what they are

not. Both schools consider power to be knowledge; and knowledge to be power. Although they agree that power not only uses and corrupts knowledge but also sets *conditions* for knowledge, they disagree on what these conditions are.

Because they hold different epistomological assumptions about the process and effects of mass communication, they also disagree on whether we should construct theories of society or theories of media. Criticists would say we need both *concepts* of society and media to form a *theory* of society, since media are such an integral part of the social operation. The important lesson—taught by Williams (1975), Golding and Murdock (1978), etc.—is that (1) media operation is inseparable from the political ideology and economic mechanism; and (2) elites use media as a major means of controlling the masses, and this use legitimizes their ruling authority. Therefore, in a sense, criticists would argue that once there is a sound theory of society, which inevitably incorporates the role of media in society, there is no need for the theory of media. The examination of the forest would provide sufficient information about the trees, so they would say.

On the other hand, noncriticists' main interest has been in the examination of the trees rather than the forest. They study how much water, how much sunshine, and how much fertilizer would be required to bring up grand looking trees; they often are negligent of whether it is the right kind of soil or appropriate temperature for these trees. Naturally, there should be theories of media, so they would say.

Over the years, both criticists and noncriticists have been trying to give the definitive account of social reality. Their disagreements are about *what really constitutes an adequate account of social and political phenomena.* These disagreements have prevailed for quite some time. And one can do no more than suggest a way out of these disagreements: the reason why philosophy is so relevant for the study of society is that it takes an uncommited view toward different and competing ways of life and ways of thinking.

Overall, the development (or evolution) that we have seen in the field of

"mainstream" mass communication are:

(1)the search for empirical correlation,

(2)the task of interpreting social and political reality, and

(3)the critique of this "reality".

These are *not* three distinct types of inquiry. They are three internal moments of theorizing about social and political life and the way mass communication works. We do not have to choose between theories of society and theories of media. Nor do we have to choose between critical theories and administrative theories. They are not, and should not be, matters of choosing one and ignoring a second. They may both account for certain amount of variances in the ways in which media operate in this society. Therefore, what need not be reconciled might be what each of the schools beleives about the structure and function of mass communication, although there may be a room for ontological reconciliation as to *how* they have come to know what they know.

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